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The Task of Theology Today: Doctrines and Dogmas, Victor Pfitzner, Hilary Regan

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Book Reviews

ELEANOR DANIEL AND MARK LOVE, EDITORS

When There Are No Words: Finding Your Way to Cope With Loss and Grief

By Charlie Walton

Pathfinder Publishing of California, 1996. 112 pages.

Charlie Walton's *When There Are No Words* is a very clear, concise, and practical treatment of the subject of grief and loss. The book is a conversation between Walton, a victim of the tragic, sudden loss of his two sons, and any person that is struggling to endure the first hours, weeks, and months of a loss. *When There Are No Words* describes that difficult moment when a person so desperately wants to say something to comfort or console a friend or loved one and *no words* seem adequate or appropriate.

After the death of his sons, Tim (22) and Don (19), and Don's best friend, Bryan (19), Walton decided to use his gift of writing to share what he has learned along his journey of grief and loss. He walks the reader through many topics, ideas, or thoughts a person dealing with loss is likely to experience. The topics he addresses are: "Prior Coping Strategies," "Altered Perception," "Allowing People to Help You," "People Say A Lot of Dumb Things," "Methods of Communication," "The 'First Time' for Everyone Else to Hear of the Death," "Inevitable Guilt," "All That Stuff," "Effect on Relationships," "Returning to Work," "Coping with Holidays," "Getting Mad at God," "Time Does Not Heal All Wounds." Walton follows these with a prayer for his readers and with resources for coping with grief and loss. Walton is very clear that each person experiences grief and loss in a different way. Each person needs to find what is "right" or what works.

I highly recommend this book for professionals who work with clients who have experienced loss and for any person who has experienced loss in his or her own life. It is a short 112 pages full of useful and practical information. It is one of the most help-

ful, practical, and easy to read books that I have read to date regarding grief and loss. It is a "must add" to a resource list on grief and sudden loss.

JENNY NEWSOM BUFFORD

Ms. Newsom Bufford is a licensed clinical social worker at Vanderbilt University Medical Center and a therapist with the Counseling Center at Woodmont Hills Church of Christ in Nashville, Tennessee.

Where Is God When It Hurts?

By Philip Yancey

Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1990. 285 pages.

Where Is God When It Hurts? is a revision of Yancey's 1977 book by the same title. Yancey was asked several times to respond to the theme of suffering after the events of September 11. He decided to remain silent and instead reached an agreement with Zondervan Press to republish this book in a format that allowed it to be half the original price with the cover noting, "All author's royalties and publisher's profits will benefit the American Red Cross."

The book is divided into five parts: "Why Is There Such a Thing as Pain?," "Is Pain a Message from God?," "How People Respond to Suffering," "How Can We Cope with Pain?," and "How Does Faith Help?" A discussion guide with questions for individual or group use concludes the book.

Yancey reviews most of the major figures in Western history who have dealt with the problem of suffering, as well as the issues it raises. Yet the strength of Yancey's work is that he never falls into the trap of dealing with this topic in an abstract or theoretical manner. His main contribution throughout his writing is that he stays tuned to the personal and the pastoral. In fact, the book is written to the average reader rather than to the minister or theo-

logian. However, most ministers and theologians would greatly benefit from his pastoral tone and clarity of expression.

One of Yancey's unique contributions to the discussion of the problem of suffering is his discussion of the important role that pain plays in one's life. He goes into great detail describing the benefit of pain to the human person and what happens when one is unable to feel pain. He then makes an important distinction between pain and suffering.

Yancey deals with most of the relevant biblical passages, especially Job, and concludes, "Questions about cause lie within God's domain; we cannot expect to understand those answers. . . . Instead, *response* is our assignment." Unfortunately, Yancey neglects the Psalms and the richness and honesty that the lament Psalms in particular could bring to the table. The various psalmists wrestling with God as covenant partner could fruitfully be discussed as we come to terms with our own various situations and the God who pursues us.

Yancey never strays far from the concrete stories of people who have greatly suffered in a variety of circumstances. The people he mentions, some well known and some unknown, provide honest accounts of people making faithful responses to suffering. In the end, Yancey wants to share with his readers what a difference Christian faith really makes. "Today, if I had to answer the question 'Where is God when it hurts?' in a single sentence, I would make that sentence another question: 'Where is the church when it hurts?' We form the front line of God's response to the suffering world."

Yancey begins the book with an account of a friend who was suffering with cancer and all the inappropriate and destructive religious clichés that Christians used to "comfort" her. The true strength of Yancey's book may not be primarily for those hurting, but for those who seek to provide comfort to those who hurt in the name of the one who suffered for us and who now suffers with us.

MARK MANASSEE

Mark Manassee is a chaplain at Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville, Tennessee.

Living With Grief: Who We Are, How We Grieve

Edited by Kenneth J. Doka and Joyce D. Davidson.
Hospice Foundation of America, 1998, 314 pages.

Living With Grief: Who We Are, How We Grieve is a collection of essays that were originally oral presentations given at the 1998 National Bereavement Teleconference hosted by the Hospice Foundation of America. The audience was made up of hospice workers—doctors, nurses, social workers, counselors, clergy, and other related professionals. The editor, Kenneth J. Doka, a well-respected researcher and author on the subjects of death, dying, and bereavement, writes the introduction to the book as well as an introduction to each of the four sections. These introductions in themselves give the reader an excellent overview of the prevailing thoughts on supporting an individual through the grief process.

Thoughts of death, whether our own, of a person close to us, or even of an acquaintance, do not come easily. When we do think of issues related to grief, it is easiest to think of those who are most like us, those with whom we identify and with whom we would grieve similarly. At first glance, it may be easy to assume that grief is experienced and expressed in somewhat the same manner universally. On further reflection, most people would acknowledge the impact that culture, ethnicity, gender, and life cycle stage would have on the grief process. This series of essays makes these differences clear, allowing "the helper" to engage the grieving person in a supportive, empathetic manner, despite the variations of age, gender, ethnicity, development, faith, and culture.

Underlying this main theme of cultural sensitivity is the acknowledgement that the theoretical basis for dealing with issues of death has shifted. While respecting the landmark work of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, the writer reminds us that coping with loss is not a homogenized process. Rather, it is a process that will be as individual as those who enter into it. The variables of age, gender, culture, spirituality, and class identify us as individuals and affect the way we each grieve.

In any collection of essays, there are clearly some that are weaker and some that stand out in their clarity of thought, respect for the audience, and understanding of the issue. In this collection, some are best read with the image in mind of a dedicated

person who is passionate about this work and this message but does not have the gift of speech-making or of writing. While reading other essays, it is easy to imagine a gifted writer who is not able to convey passion or care. There are still others that are well researched, well written and that evidently come from a soul inspired by and committed to this work. While the book features variations in writing style, it has a consistency of message. The essayists represent a variety of ethnic, religious, and cultural groups but still have a consistent voice in their message. The importance of listening and making no assumptions about the cultural variations in grieving is stated repeatedly and emphatically.

As a research tool, this book would make an excellent addition to one's pastoral counseling library. Whether one wants to know how to pay respects to a Jewish neighbor who has recently died, what is appropriate behavior at the funeral of an African-American work associate, or how one acknowledges the loss of a person whose life-long same-gender partner has died, these essays lead one to an empathetic understanding of others' needs. It also encourages us to ask the sensitive questions that will make us better caretakers in times of grief.

DEBBIE PAULS

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Shattered Dreams: God's Unexpected Pathway to Joy

By Larry Crabb

Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2001. 224 pages.

Meaningless suffering is deadly to the human spirit. Those of us who have cared for people in trauma and loss have often heard the question "why" and understand the danger inherent in a search for explanations for suffering. The quest for hasty answers is often an escape from pain and a faith structure that will not hold up through the grief. Answers that defend God's transcendent providence rarely give relief. More likely, they induce invalidation and alienation. When the person has moved beyond the initial stages of grief and into processing the pain, he or she is able to effectively begin the search for meaning. Larry Crabb, the popular Christian author

and counselor, has written a helpful guide for this journey.

Crabb reassures us that God is present and active in our suffering, but rarely, if ever, where or how we prefer. Clearly and early on, Crabb states the assumptions that help us in our search for meaning. (1) God wants to bless us. This is God's greatest and constant longing. But the good that God gives is for our transformation and often not the good we initially desire. Here is the rub within our suffering. (2) The highest dream we could desire is to know and actually experience God. But we really don't believe this at the deepest level, so we invest our passion in lesser dreams. (3) Thus God allows our lower dreams to be shattered. The Holy Spirit awakens our deepest desire for God through the pain of shattered dreams. We then yearn for God with the deepest passion. Thus our shattered dreams are never random because they are a chapter in a larger story. God works through the pain of shattered dreams to our higher dream for God and the joy of finding God.

Consistent with a more classic Christian spirituality (e.g., Crabb references *St. John of the Cross* and spiritual author Thomas Merton), Crabb in so many words explains suffering as the deconstruction of our egocentric existence (the author of lesser dreams) and the beginning of a re-centering in the Spirit of Christ (the author of our highest dream). This is the book's most helpful point—one that is often difficult to embrace, especially in a spiritual culture that seems obsessed with individual blessing and happiness (lesser dreams?) and that abhors the notion of redemptive suffering. Redemptive suffering is the struggle to consent to our own de-centering and the openness to a re-centering in Christ.

I found this book to be quite helpful in pastoral conversation and counseling. I recommended it to two people who are in the crucible of shattered dreams: a counselee whose husband is dying of cancer and a friend and church member who continues a two-year battle with melanoma. For the church member, the book "profoundly" and accurately articulated his own discovery through suffering and the transformation that brought him into a joyful intimacy with God not possible before his life was shattered. He readily acknowledges the deeper blessing that has come through suffering, particularly the spiritual intimacy he now enjoys with those he loves. For the counselee, the book intensified her questions of theodicy. Although it affirmed her belief in God's

loving mercy, especially mediated through church and friends, the book also intensified her struggle with God's activity seen as discipline and at times even punishment. While clinging firmly to a loving, supportive, and merciful God, she voices her emerging struggle with why he is letting it last so long. The psalmists echo her own lament: "I love you God . . . but enough, enough already."

This raises a difficulty with Crabb's book. In tackling theodicy, he seems to vacillate between seeing God as an impassible providential antagonist and as one who understands our suffering but withholds intervention for our higher good. One notices a glaring lack of a christological perspective on suffering. In fact, Crabb primarily uses the story of Naomi from the book of Ruth as a source for his reflection. While rambling at times, in general his clinical knowledge of grief, his personal reflections, and the stories he relates help the reader bring his point home. His musings on Ruth have the same effect. Although engaging, his work simply is not good exegesis. He "psychologizes" the text. It could also be argued that he overlooks a greater message that Yahweh's faithful love extends to all, including the outsider, who ironically exhibits true faith. As it is, Crabb's tact reinforces the popular focus on individual salvation and blessing. In light of September 11, such a theology strains to provide a response that resonates. Seldom are we encouraged to link our personal suffering to the greater story of God's cosmic redemption in Christ, a perspective that can further dethrone our basic egocentrism. A theology of the cross (*a la* Moltmann) does not reveal an antagonistic God removed from our suffering, but allows us to welcome a suffering God who through Christ freely enters our affliction, taking it on *for* and *with* us. Ultimately, the passion and death of Jesus Christ points to the mystery of God's presence in our suffering and God's redemption of the world when all idolatrous dreams and ideologies inevitably shatter.

Crabb's treatment of suffering may leave the reader itching for more biblical and theological clarity, and it may raise more questions than it answers. It is, however, provocative. The counselee who struggled to make sense of a loving God who disciplined her through pain experienced an oppressive sense of guilt over the "selfish" need to take time for herself and take a break from the constant care of her dying husband. Her reading didn't resolve this dilemma, but intensified it. This fueled further dia-

logue until she accepted a suggestion to contemplate Christ's suffering. This opened her to the possibility that God was not the author of her shattered dreams and to the realization that God was suffering with her. This threw her off balance, and she played with an image where God smiled as she took respite for herself. She enjoyed a taste of transformation and redemption. She realized God looked at her not with punitive contempt, but with delight as she accepted an emerging sense of freedom and joy, even in the midst of her suffering.

DAVID PILLAR

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The Task of Theology Today: Doctrines and Dogmas.

By Victor Pfitzner and Hilary Regan

Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998. 219 pages.

The Task of Theology is a publication of the Australian Theological Forum, which is "an independent theological body that is ecumenical in outlook and seeks to facilitate the engagement of Christian theology with other disciplines in addressing areas of social and cultural concern" (ix). This volume contains papers from the Forum's July 1997 colloquium on the role of doctrines and dogmas in contemporary theology and is the first in a series dedicated to examining various aspects of theological inquiry in our time. The essays are written from a variety of perspectives and offer a handful of "tasks" to which any relevant theology must attend.

In the opening essay, "Dogma, Church and the Task of Theology," Reformed theologian Colin E. Gunton suggests that doctrine is essential to theology as the boundary of the "garden" within which theology is cultivated. Carl Braaten offers a Lutheran perspective in his contribution, "The Role of Dogma in Church and Theology." Braaten rebuffs the revisionist tendency to prioritize experience over dogma in theology, proposing a revival of Trinitarian theology as a medium for re-engaging the systematic task in a constructive manner for the church. Stylianos Harkianakis, who represents the Orthodox tradition, argues in "Dogma and Authority in the Church" that dogma best serves theological inquiry when understood in its four-fold sense as: (1) truths taught by the church;

(2) truths established by councils; (3) a theological task of the church; and (4) the Christian community itself. These three essays discuss the role of dogmas and doctrines in general, affirming the positive functions they play in the contemporary theological task. The five remaining papers begin from the opposite viewpoints, considering a variety of specific theological concerns and assessing their impact on the larger domain of the role of dogma and doctrine in theology.

Sue Patterson's essay, "Creation and Postmodernity," argues that "the postmodern turn to the subject may be an ally" (80) of Christian doctrine because it takes contingency seriously. As a result, the possibilities for a christological approach to understanding creation are opened, allowing for the dogmatic affirmation of divine being and participation in time and history, as well as human participation in an evolving creation. Stephen Pickard, in "Unable to See the Wood for the Trees": John Locke and the Fate of Systematic Theology," envisions John Locke as the turning point that set dogmatics on a course toward irrelevance. However, Pickard suggests that Locke's contribution to theology cannot simply be discarded because of this negative contribution to the systematic tradition. Locke's critical realism, Pickard affirms, stands as a significant contribution to the task of Christian theology.

"Traditional Doctrine and the Antique World-View: Two Case Studies, the Virgin Birth and Original Sin" presents Dennis Minns' re-engagement of classical theology's unified notion of *logos* as an affront to the division between theological knowledge and other forms of knowledge in our time. Minns' essay calls modern theology to embrace the epistemological stance of the Fathers, which he demonstrates through a presentation of the doctrines of the virgin birth and original sin. In "The 'Open Heaven': Understanding Other Faiths in God's World," Winifred Wing Han Lamb points theology to a cautious "love of truth" that is willing to risk open engagement with other faiths. Through this openness, Lamb suggests, contemporary theology will grow in the depth of its own self-understanding. In the final contribution to this volume, "The Status of Doctrine: Kierkegaardian Explorations," Murray Rae takes the reader on a journey into Søren Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments*. The purpose of this voyage is to allow modern theology to understand what Kierkegaard unveiled centuries hence; namely, that the quality of theological understanding is as significant as other forms of human understanding. Kierkegaard's theo-

logical realism, then, serves as an appropriate foundation from which the task of theology may begin.

As with any collection of this sort, the quality of the contributions varies. The pieces by Gunton, Braaten, and Rae rise to the surface, in my opinion, providing substantial insight into the question of the status of dogma and doctrine in present-day theology. While these essays stand out, the collection as a whole provides a broad spectrum of "tasks" that will aid any theologian called to articulate faithfully the Christian faith to the church that takes shape within our "postmodern" context. This single task, I would argue, gives meaning to the several different "tasks" offered in this volume.

Those in the Restoration tradition will benefit from an engagement with this collection of essays in several different ways. First, the traditional Restoration stance against theology will be challenged by the affirmation of these authors that doctrine is not the sum of theology, but is the product of a larger theological perspective. Once doctrine is established within a particular theological context, then, and only then, may it serve as a boundary for future theology. Second, as Locke's theological heirs, readers from a Restoration heritage will appreciate Pickard's assessment of the significance of his contribution. However, readers will also enjoy Rae's proposal that Locke's realism is grounded in a particular understanding of the created world that is challenged by Kierkegaard's notion of a peculiarly Christian reality that stands over against the sort of "realism" the Restoration tradition has inherited. Finally, the numerous perspectives in these essays will place Restoration thinkers in constructive dialogue with theologians from other traditions. Through continued examination and discussion of theological proposals like those offered in this work, the Restoration tradition will participate with other Christian traditions and will gravitate toward a more unitive theological vision that will foster greater unity within the body of Christ.

I found *The Task of Theology* to be both theologically enriching and challenging. I would suggest this book to professors as a text for graduate level introduction to theology seminars as a way to engage the discussion of the status of traditional doctrines for contemporary theology.

CARL FLYNN

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